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ABSTRACT

The use of discipline as a positive learning experience that sets limits for behavior of children by guiding them to and through adulthood is presented in the fourth booklet of a series on parenting education for American Indians. Five major areas parents can teach children by their own behavior are tasks, curiosity and interest in learning, respect for others, emotional control, and problem solving. Chapters on infants, early childhood, and adolescence offer suggestions in dealing with discipline at these age groups. Another chapter looks at alternative kinds of punishment besides physical punishment. The concluding chapter suggests both parents share the responsibility of discipline. (ERB)

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Discipline Skills

Introduction ..... *pg. 1*
Parents as Teachers ..... *pg. 2-3*
Curiosity and Interest in Learning ..... *pg. 4*
Respect for Others ..... *pg. 5*
Emotional Control ..... *pg. 6*
Problem Solving ..... *pg. 6*
Infants ..... *pg. 8*
Early Childhood ..... *pg. 9-10*
Adolescence ..... *pg. 11*
What If ..... *pg. 12*
Kinds of Punishments ..... *pg. 13-14*
Rewards ..... *pg. 15*
Share the Responsibility ..... *pg. 15*

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Introduction

One of the hardest parts of parenting is discipline. It seems like we always do too much or too little. Discipline should be a positive learning experience that sets limits for behavior of our children, and guides them to and through adulthood. In an extended family setting, using a permissive form of discipline, with very little physical punishment, has worked well in the past for Indian people.

Discipline originally meant "teaching." Discipline was a body of knowledge that we imparted to our children. We never used to think of discipline as punishing or hurting our children. When our Indian children first went to boarding schools, they learned a new concept of discipline. Discipline equalled punishment. Now we are living with the fallout from the era of boarding school discipline on Indian children. Those children grew up and used the same kind of physical punishment on their own children. We are practicing now what was learned many years ago in boarding schools. Many of us have inherited from the boarding school era *that new way* of relating to our children and to each other that is not very good for us.

Now we often punish our children physically as a way of teaching them correct behavior. This is not always the best way to teach them. In the booklet on *Child Development Stages,* we learned about a few ways to teach our children that are better than physical punishment. One of these ways is by praise for good acts, rewards and other positive reinforcement. Another is by setting a good example in our own behavior.

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Parents as Teachers

Indian mothers and fathers have a difficult job, but few are trained for it with teaching skills. This booklet will help you develop some skills as a teacher that will be useful as you discipline your children. Remember that *all behavior is learned,* and our childrens' first teacher is ourselves.

Children watch other people and imitate them. The people they imitate most are their models. Much of what children learn comes from watching their parents. How do you act toward each other? Do you talk to each other with respect? Do you share concern for each other's feelings? Are you able to share all kinds of feelings and experiences?

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Parents can't always model the best behavior. However, you can learn to watch your behavior more closely, and understand how your children learn from it. There are five major areas parents can teach children by our own behavior. These are the areas that are most important for your child. They are:

(1) Tasks
(2) Curiosity and interest in learning
(3) Respect for others
(4) Emotional control
(5) Problem solving

If parents can be good models for these five areas, most of the discipline of your child will be done successfully.

(1) Tasks

Children do not always understand how or why parents want certain tasks to be done. Parents need to *explain* what is expected and *show* the child how to do it. To model task, parents need to demonstrate common sense, wisdom—a well thought out process for solution to a problem or task.

—explain what needs to be done
—show how to do it, step by step, slowly, to help the child follow along
—let the child repeat each step while you give guidance or help
—praise the child for trying

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(2) Curiosity and Interest in Learning

Children are naturally curious. They want to learn about their world. Sometimes this curiosity gets them into trouble. Parents should set limits on the children's behavior. Parents can encourage interest by modeling it:

—answer children's questions in your native tongue if possible, or as much as possible

—read aloud to them about their heritage, tribe customs, traditions

—show an interest in things yourself, especially new ideas and experiences

—discuss the things you do together, such as traditional tribal functions, Indian churches and ceremonies

—take different trips to explore new things (museums, parks, zoo, etc.)

—take children to special events (pow-wows, rodeos, movies, concerts)

—teach them their tribal language as much as possible,
—Indian values, opportunities to choose interest by at-
—tending both functions (i.e., contemporary Indian church as well as tribal ceremonies)

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(3) Respect for Others

It takes children a while to learn to respect others. At first all they know is what *they* want or desire to fear. Later they learn to respect others' feelings, if respect is shown to them.

Children who develop good inner control have usually seen good self-control in their parents. They have learned that rules exist for reasons. They learn to do things out of respect for others, rather than out of fear of punishment. To model respect for others, parents can:

—treat everyone, children and adults, all races and sexes, politely and nicely

—emphasize *good* qualities of other people

—accept and appreciate differences in people

—show concern for others' feelings

—do things together as a family

—help others express their feelings

—share responsibilities and show confidence in each other

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Indian people have traditionally held a great respect for all peoples. We have a tradition of respect in our culture and in our spirituality. We respect the earth, elders, children, animals, all of life. We have lost some of this respect along with our languages and many of our customs. But it is not too late to maintain those which are left, and to use traditional concepts of respect in raising our children.

(4) Emotional Control

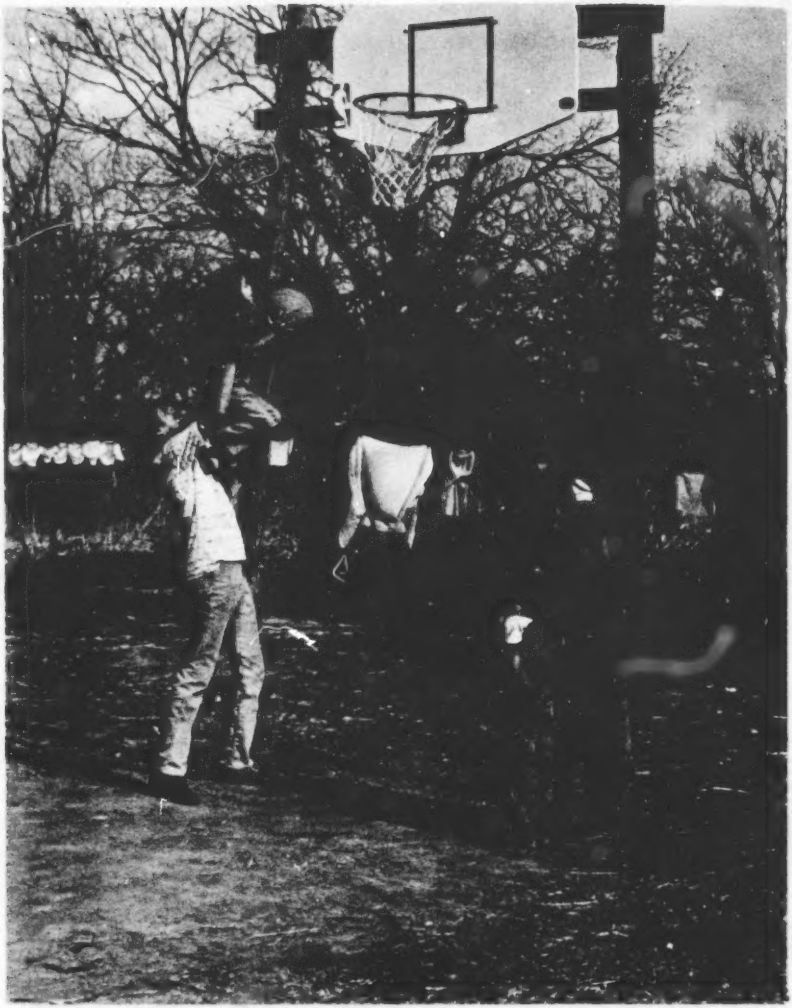
Children must learn how to control their emotions. They can learn this gradually by watching parents and other adults. To model emotional control, parents can:

- —control their own emotions (especially anger)
- —show that even very strong emotions can be controlled, through reasoning, fortitude
- —demonstrate patience, strength
- —show positive ways of expressing anger, through common sense, sportsmanship, spiritual guidance
- —show how to explain and discuss feelings and the reasons for them

(5) Problem Solving

Children learn from adults how to solve problems. They can learn to look at problems as something to work on instead of just something to get angry or depressed about. They need to see that there may be different possible solutions to any problem. Parents can model ways of solving problems by:

- —approaching problems with positive attitude ("we can work it out")
- —thinking out loud ("let's see: what can we do about this?")
- —discussing different solutions ("how do you think it'd be if we did this?")
- —playing problem-solving games, Indian games, with their children
- —seeking spiritual guidance



Parents will find their job is impossible if they do not "practice what they preach." Children tend to model our actions before they listen to our words. Being a positive model means acting the way you want your children to act.

Stages of children talks about some of the ways children learn at different ages. Following is a breadown of some forms of discipline that are useful at different ages.

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Infants

Infants from birth to two years have it made. With understanding and patient parents, all an infant needs to do is sleep, eat and wake you up. You meet the infant's needs for loving, hugging, cleaning, playing and laughing. It is a sad fact, however, that most fatal instances of child abuse happen with infants. This is because parents lose their patience, grow tired and frustrated and angry, and need help in releasing these feelings in other ways.

Infants learn how to act by wanting to please their parents. They learn that it is nice to be liked. We help our infants learn to feel good about themselves mostly by talking pleasantly to them and showing them affection and attention. Babies don't understand our words, but they understand our feelings. They will cry when we speak angrily with them, and gurgle when we speak lovingly. With an infant, we need to learn to express positive feelings as much as possible.

We must not try to teach infants things too early. If we try to teach a baby toilet training before it is time, there will be anger, frustration, and disappointment. We need to be patient mostly, and not expect too much. Expecting babies, or children of any age, to do something they are not ready to do, will teach them failure, anger and unhappiness.

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Early Childhood

From age two til nine or ten, children are real sensitive to the actions of adults. Their feelings are easily hurt. They are real sensitive to our love and to our anger. Try not to be overly critical of children. As they get older, they will gradually learn to understand our explanations of why they must do or not do something. Words become more important at a later age.

At around age two, children learn an important word. The word is "NO." They do a lot of testing, to see if you mean what you say. They want to find out just how far they can go with you. As they reach preschool age, their world grows much larger. They explore everything, and will get into almost anything . Try not to get too upset when they do this. It is a natural part of their growth and learning. Keep valuable things out of their reach. You want your children to be curious, and to try new things. Toys and play are really important to them at this age. They need things they can investigate.

During the preschool years, you should be giving your child the most opportunity to experience freedom within a certain space. Think of discipline as a large yard surrounded by a firm fence that allows your child to explore within boundaries.

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When children start school, they are eager to learn and to associate with other children. This is the beginning of the most exciting part of their lives. Many of their experiences with other children are painful. They need your loving guidance to help them understand how to relate to other children. They also need some degree of firmness, without physical punishment and without the use of shame or guilt. School-age children soon learn that there are sometimes unpleasant consequences to their behavior.

Serious bad acts should be dealt with firmly and clearly. You must be very clear about what must not be done and what must be done. This is best taught in a positive way, by emphasizing the good things your child is learning and doing. If all you do is talk about how bad your child is, he or she will develop a bad self-image.

As the children grow older, you can use more discipline by helping them keep busy. Plan lots of activities they can do. Keep them away from other children who are really bad. This will reduce bad incidents, and will let them know what you will not accept. If problems do develop, work very closely with people at the school to see how your child can be helped.

Adolescence

Parents often have the most trouble when their children are adolescents, from age 12 to 18. This is a time of great change for the children, and also a time when the major task of your children is to establish a sense of their own identity. Each adolescent must do this for himself or herself. You cannot do it for them. They are much more interested in what other kids their age think than in what parents think. It is important that they select friends who are good examples.

At this age your children may begin doing things that adults do. They are half children, half adult. They are experimenting with being adult. You can allow them to do this, and at the same time set limitations. Don't expect them not to do something if you do it! At this age you will begin to get back what you have given them. Try to take a long-range view of your adolescent child's behavior. Keep things in perspective and don't lose your cool. Have faith in yourself, for what you have given in terms of love, guidance, and direction will not be lost in the turmoil. Your gifts may just be suspended for awhile.

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What If . . .?

No parents are perfect. It's too hard a job. All of us will make mistakes. Most of our mistakes are made when we're upset about something. Sometimes we are a good model and our children *still* act wrong. It takes all the patience we can have to keep our cool.

There are some little ways to help keep us from losing our cool. Here are some:

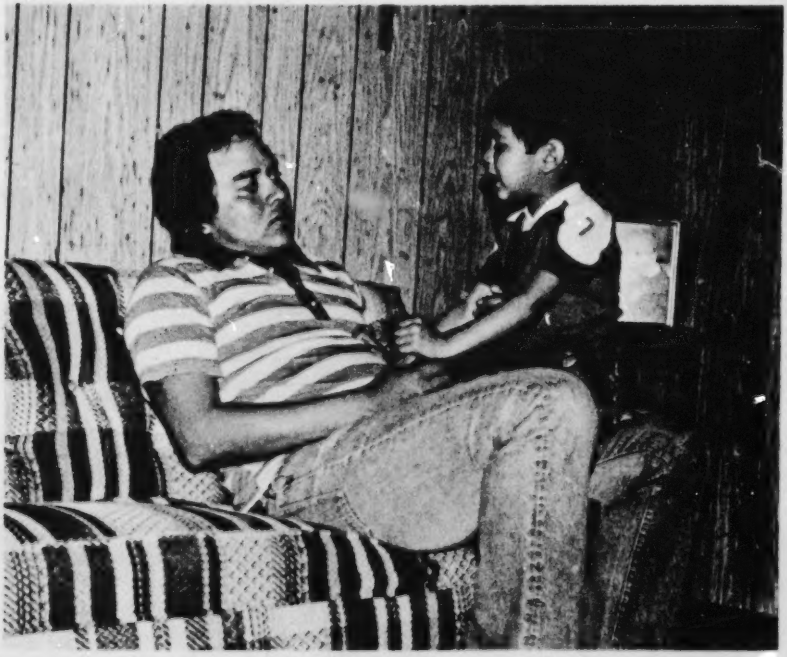
—count to 50 before you say anything

—leave the room until you are calm, then return

—get a drink of water to cool off, then talk about it

—send the children to their room until everyone is calm

But sometimes we lose our cool anyway. Don't worry. Everyone does. It is best if we recognize it, and later talk about it with our children. The booklet on parent-child communication discusses this more fully. We should also feel free to talk about it with other parents. Other parents can help give insight into problems we are facing.



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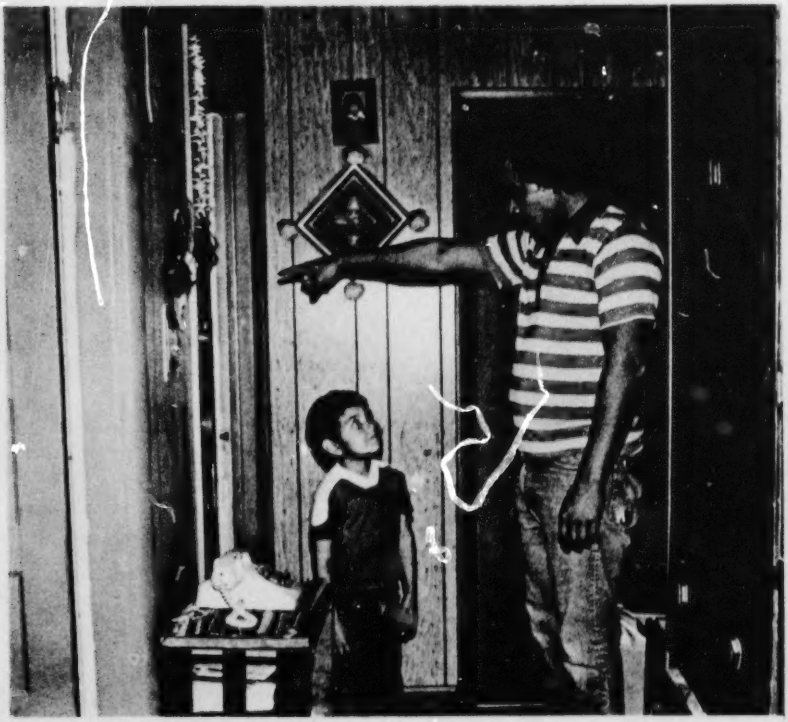
Kinds of Punishment

There are lots of ways we can teach our children. Rewarding them for good acts is the best way. But sometimes they *do* need punishment. Physical punishment (spanking, etc.) is not the best kind of punishment. Some other kinds are:

- —grounding them (sending them to their room)
- —removing a privilege (no TV for a week)
- —assigning a special job (sweeping the house)
- —washing their mouth out with soap (for using foul language, etc.)
- —giving back (if some toy was taken, etc.)

An important rule to remember is to make the punishment fit the crime. There are several levels of punishment. Start with the lowest. If that doesn't work, move up a step. Example: no television for one day moves up to no television for a week.



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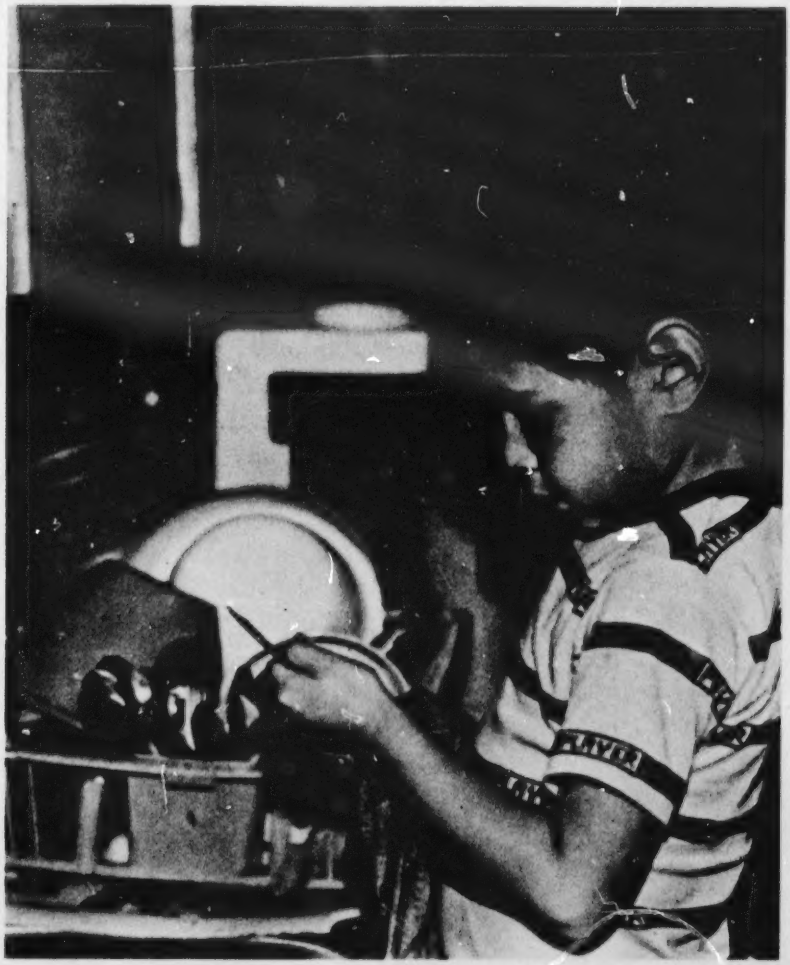
Another important rule is to be consistent. Don't reward a behavior one time and then punish or ignore it the next time. This confuses your child.

Another good rule is not to use threats that you won't fulfill. Keep your promises. Example: If you tell a child you will let him or her go to the park if they clean their room first, stick to it. Don't let them go to the park anyway; if they do, call them back until their room is clean. Or if you tell your child he or she will be grounded from television if they don't do dishes, stick to it.



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Rewards

Rewards fall into different levels too. They should match the act as well. Over-rewarding puts the parent in a bind. If you give your child a dollar for doing dishes, you may be committing yourself to a $50 per week bill! Under-rewarding discourages the good behavior. ("A nickle! I'll never do *that* again for just a lousy nickle!")

Share the Responsibility

Sometimes one parent may do all the punishment, or all the rewarding. This is not good. The child may learn to dislike one parent, or to prefer one over the other. All adults and older brothers and sisters in your extended family can help you discipline your children. Remember, discipline is teaching. Learn to ask for and enjoy their help. Discuss it so you will all be consistent in rewards and punishments. Don't let your children play one parent off against the other.

Here is a summary outline to help you understand discipline better:

- —discipline is not punishment
- —discipline is not shame
- —discipline is not guilt
- —discipline helps the child think
- —discipline helps the child learn so present and future acts are changed
- —discipline helps the child grow in mind and in spirit
- —discipline helps develop self-confidence and a positive self-image
- —discipline is best taught by example
- —discipline should be shared